foreign equity upto 74% is allowed on the automatic route for both exploration and mining operations. However, proposals seeking higher than 74% foreign equity for diamonds and precious stones are considered by the Foreign Investment Promotion Board (FIPB). The Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957 has also been suitably amended to make it more investor friendly.

The FIPB, in consultation with the Ministry of Mines, has so far approved 72 proposals of FDI in the mining sector. The Indian subsidiary companies of global mining companies have taken permits for reconnaissance operations involving state-of-the-art technology for aerial, geophysical and geochemical surveys for exploring minerals.

Rise in Gold Prices

845. SHRI K. RAMA MOHANA RAO: Will the Minister of MINES be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that gold prices are shooting up in the recent past;

(b) if so, the reasons for such a sudden spurt in the price of gold and other precious metals such as platinum, etc.; and

(c) the total quantity of gold imported by India during the last five years, year-wise?

THE MINISTER OF STATE OF THE MINISTRY OF MINES (SHRI RAMESH BAIS): (a) and (b) Yes, Sir. Gem and Jewellery Export Promotion Council, an organization sponsored by Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Department of Commerce has reported that there has been a rise of 14.25% in annual average price of gold between 2001 and 2002 in the international market. The main reasons of this rise, as reported by Minerals and Metals Trading Corporation (MMTC) Limited, a Government of India Enterprise under the administrative control of Department of Commerce, are threats of war between United States of America and Iraq, investments by fund managers due to weakening of dollar and steep increase in demand of gold in Japan.

(c) The quantity of gold imported by India during the last five years is as follows:

Year	Quantity in tonnes
1998-1999	538.87
1999-2000	558.91
2000-2001	583.72
2001-2002*	496.93
2002-2003 (upto December 2002)*	377.94

*The figures are provisional.

Electrification of villages from solar energy in Himachal Pradesh

846. SHRI ANIL SHARMA: Will the Minister of NON-CONVENTIONAL ENERGY SOURCES be pleased to state:

(a) number of villages in Himachal Pradesh that have been electrified with the help of solar energy cells during the last three years;

(b) what is the potential of electricity connection using solar energy in the State; and

(c) how much funds have been allotted to Himachal Pradesh under the Solar Village Electrification Scheme during this year?

THE MINISTER OF STATE OF THE MINISTRY OF NON-CONVENTIONAL ENERGY SOURCES (SHRI M. KANNAPPAN): (a) to (c) The Government is implementing a programme for the electrification of villages in the remote and difficult areas of the country. Under this programme, renewable energy systems like solar Photo Voltaic Systems, small hydro units and biomass gasifiers are installed in unelectrified villages to provide lighting and other services. Almost all census villages in the State of Himachal Pradesh are already electrified by conventional means. No village in Himachal Pradesh has been electrified through solar energy during the last three years and hence, no fund was released during last three years for this purpose.

A potential of 150 KW has been estimated by HIMURJA for installation of decentralised SPV systems in the remote areas of Himachal Pradesh